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4. Why is Elena so invested in her education? Is it a means to an end, or an end unto itself? If a means to an end, what end? And if a means, is she being realistic or is she fooling herself?

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5. What is revealed of the girls' characters on the day they decide to skip school? Do these discoveries surprise you? How does this effect their relationship (or our sense of their relationship)?

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6. Ferrante returns to the theme of "mother-daughter relationship" in *My Brilliant Friend*. What are the abiding characteristics of this relationship? Who do you feel suffers the most—mother or daughter? Why?

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7. It can be assumed that Elena's voice is behind the title of the novel, referring to Lila as "her brilliant friend." However, toward the end of the girls' story, it is Lila who praises Elena, and encourages her to be "the best of all, boys and girls" (pg. 312). Is this dialogue between the two girls symbolic of Lila's surrender? Are you surprised by Lila's words?

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8. Lila's rustic personality and crude comments sometimes come off as hurtful and malicious. Furthermore, although both families struggle with poverty, it is the Cerulloes who appear to be the underprivileged of the two. Why, nonetheless, does Elena remain a highly devout friend? What does this say about Elena?

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9. What do the shoes that Lila designs and makes represent symbolically? What undertones do the shoes help to evidence in the latter half of the novel?

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10. How would the book be different if told from the point of view of Lila or another character? Is Elena's point of view the most appropriate? Why or why not? Explain.

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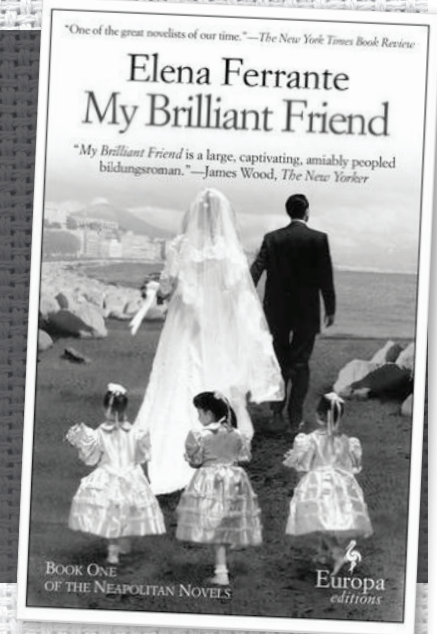
11. Page 282: "Do you love Stefano?" She said seriously, "Very much." "More than your parents, more than Rino?" "More than everyone, but not more than you." Lila's personality seems to have grown warmer by the end of the novel. What can we attribute this change to?

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## Discussion Questions

"Ferrante's novels are intensely, violently personal, and because of this they seem to dangle bristling key chains of confession before the unsuspecting reader."

- James Wood  
*The New Yorker*



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**Elena Ferrante** is the pen-name of an Italian novelist whose true identity is not publicly known. Though heralded as the most important Italian novelist of her generation, she has kept her identity secret since the publication of her first novel in 1992.

**Works:** Ferrante is the author of a half dozen novels, the most well-known of which is *Days of Abandonment*. Her four “Neapolitan Novels” revolve around two perceptive and intelligent girls from Naples who try to create lives for themselves within a violent and stultifying culture. The series consists of four novels: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of*

*a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave And Those Who Stay* (2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015), which was nominated for the Strega Prize, an Italian literary award.

Two of Ferrante’s novels have been turned into films by Italian filmmakers. *Troubling Love* became the 1995 feature film *Nasty Love*, and *The Days of Abandonment* became a 2005 film of the same title.

Her nonfiction book *Fragments* (2003) discusses her experiences as a writer.

**Identity:** In a January 21, 2013, article in *The New Yorker*, James Woods wrote that Ferrante has said, “books, once they are written, have no need of their authors.” Perhaps that is one reason for her pen-name.

Speculation about Ferrante’s identity is rife. In the same *New Yorker* article, Woods also wrote:

In the past twenty years or so, though, she has provided written answers to journalists’ questions, and a number of her letters have been collected and published. From them, we learn that she grew up in Naples, and has lived for periods outside Italy. She has a classics degree; she has referred to being a mother. One could also infer from her fiction and from her interviews that she is not now married. (“Over the years, I’ve moved often, in general unwillingly, out of necessity. . . . I’m no longer dependent on the movements of others, only on my own” is her encryption.) In addition to writing, “I study, I translate, I teach. (Author bio adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 9/11/2015.)

## Book Summary

A modern masterpiece from one of Italy’s most acclaimed authors, *My Brilliant Friend* is a rich, intense, and generous-hearted story about two friends, Elena and Lila. Ferrante’s inimitable style lends itself perfectly to a meticulous portrait of these two women that is also the story of a nation and a touching meditation on the nature of friendship.

The story begins in the 1950s, in a poor but vibrant neighborhood on the outskirts of Naples. Growing up on these tough streets the two girls learn to rely on each other ahead of anyone or anything else. As they grow, as their paths repeatedly diverge and converge, Elena and Lila remain best friends whose respective destinies are reflected and refracted in the other.

They are likewise the embodiments of a nation undergoing momentous change. Through the lives of these two women, Ferrante tells the story of a neighborhood, a city, and a country as it is transformed in ways that, in turn, also transform the relationship between her protagonists, the unforgettable Elena and Lila.

Ferrante is the author of three previous works of critically acclaimed fiction: *The Days of Abandonment*, *Troubling Love*, and *The Lost Daughter*. With this novel, the first in a trilogy, she proves herself to be one of Italy’s great storytellers.

She has given her readers a masterfully plotted page-turner, abundant and generous in its narrative details and characterizations, that is also a stylish work of literary fiction destined to delight her many fans and win new readers to her fiction. (From the publisher.)

## Discussion Questions

**1.** Why is Don Achille such an important character? His presence looms over the whole novel; what does he represent?

**2.** Throughout the novel, Lila earns her reputation as “the misfit,” while Elena comes to be known as “the good girl.” How do the two live vicariously through one another, and what is it about their differing personalities that makes their relationship credible? Which girl, if any, do you most easily identify with?

**3.** Domestic life in the outskirts of Naples in the 1950s is depicted as conservative, challenging, and at times, even severely violent. Ferrante uses the girls’ early “child play” to emulate the callous undertones of the town. Why is this analogy so successful? What is so important about Tina and Nu?